

Reflections on our environment, five years later

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The topic of our environment is one that involves many complex issues and one that is hampered by a lot of misinformation.

It is also a matter of increasing urgency that requires public understanding and participation. This is especially true in Vermont, where policy development involves extensive public input.

Five years ago today, this weekly environment page first appeared in the Rutland Herald and the Barre-Montpelier Times Argus. The idea was to present technical, timely information to the general public every week.

The format consisted of two basic articles: a factual feature and a Weekly Planet column contributed by various writers in the community with diverse perspectives on current environmental issues.

The realities of today's environment are forcing a transition to a more efficient and sustainable society. This transition is not simply inevitable — it is critical and requires that we understand the interconnections between climate, energy use, food and behavior.

Everyone is affected: businesses, citizens groups, farmers and foresters, students and teachers, officials in state government, politicians, voters and our children.

Adapting to climate change requires all of us to be informed, which means access to a wide range of articles presenting clear and accurate information about local and global environmental issues.

This was the original vision for this page and remains so five years later.

A snapshot of Vermont's environmental issues over the past five years emerges from taking all of the 260 feature articles that have been printed on this page during that time and considering what they represent:

- Vermont's natural environment, including such diverse aspects as birds, butterflies, marshes, meadows, forests, stream monitoring, and the land ethic — 26 percent of all articles.
- Technical solutions: renewable energy, efficiency, infrastructure changes — 22 percent.
- Community initiatives, projects and conferences, social transformation — 14 percent.
- Educational and school projects, climate and energy literacy issues — 10 percent.
- Forestry, agriculture and food issues, including biofuels, farmers markets, composting and the Vermont Farm to Plate movement — 9 percent.
- Impact of climate change on Vermont's seasonal climate and growing season — 8 percent.
- Legislative issues — 6 percent.
- Significance of personal lifestyle and energy use choices — 5 percent.



Credit: Madeline Bodin

These categories are even more significant when the sources of the articles are considered — primarily community members who are directly involved in the stewardship of Vermont's environment: scientists, naturalists, teachers, community activists, engineers, policy makers, and concerned citizens.

The largest group of articles covers how the Vermont environment is changing and speaks to our role in caring for the natural world. Many articles address technical solutions to broad environmental issues. Supported by incentives from the state, Vermont is building a renewable energy infrastructure, developing solar resources, retrofitting homes for greater winter efficiency and exploring new wind and hydropower. The many articles on community initiatives reflect the fact that significant change is happening at the grassroots level.

The importance of educational and school projects is also clear, as Vermont looks for ways to address climate and energy literacy issues and retrofit schools to use less electricity and especially less fossil fuels for winter heating. Many articles cover changes in the agricultural sector, as the local food movement, farmers markets, community-supported agriculture and local food processing systems are growing rapidly. Vermont also has extensive forest resources and an expanding wood energy industry producing wood pellets and chips for winter heating.

Climate change features in a substantial number of articles as Vermont's seasons are changing and as severe weather impacts the state. And since Vermont leads the nation in addressing environmental issues, a significant number of articles cover legislation and governance issues. Relatively few articles address core issues of personal lifestyle and energy use, even though this is a major challenge for a society accustomed to abundant supplies of cheap fossil fuels. The Weekly Planet columnists have written the most on this challenging topic.

Compiling these articles for the past five years has confirmed our perception that an informed public facilitates environmental leadership within the community. A sense of connection is empowering for individuals and community groups.

But for the relation of our society to the Earth, the issues are deeper. The stability and resilience of complex natural systems depend on a network of interdependent connections. Creating a similar system with honest flows of information for our complex human society is essential, but difficult.

Power structures have traditionally controlled and manipulated information flows, fostering confusion and mistrust. But now that humanity is driving rapid environmental change that adversely affects the global ecosystem, the consequences of such misinformation are not just unsustainable — they are self-destructive.

In this context the role of the environment page is to facilitate an honest web of information imbued with a deep sense of our interconnections, one that inspires communities to reconnect to the Earth and face the critical challenges before us.

Looking ahead, we continue to seek feature articles that convey a story about the Vermont environment in a way that relates to global concerns. We also encourage articles linked to upcoming events: workshops, conferences, planning forums, rallies and other activities that offer opportunity for community involvement.

The realities of today's environment are daunting. But as we inform ourselves and work together we become empowered to face the many challenges of the 21st century and leave the world a better place for our children.

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